

# THE ETHICOMP® ODYSSEY: 1995 TO 2015

by Simon Rogerson

At ETHICOMP 2015 I was invited to give a speech at the Gala Dinner on Tuesday 8th September 2015. It was an occasion to reflect on a 20 year journey for a group of people who have the greatest of concerns over the creation and use of information and communication technology (ICT) throughout the world. This short paper is a modified and extended version of my speech.

I was only the second after-dinner speaker at an ETHICOMP conference which reflects the informality of the community. The first speaker was in 1995 when Elizabeth France, the UK's Data Protection Registrar, spoke about the importance of data privacy across Europe. She had been in post just over one year and was keen to champion the privacy rights of the individual whenever and wherever she could. In her annual report of 1996 she acknowledged the significance of ETHICOMP and the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility (CCSR) in addressing these issues.

The story of both ETHICOMP and CCSR began one Friday afternoon in early 1994. It is the story of a serendipitous event which has resulted in a worldwide ETHICOMP community which came together this month at De Montfort University to celebrate 20 years of existence.

With a background in commercial systems development I was and remain focussed on the proper design and use of ICT systems. By 1994 I had come to realise that *proper* meant not only efficient and effective but also ethical. So on that Friday afternoon my office phone rang and Professor David Howe, my Head of Department, asked me to meet with him to discuss a letter he had just received from Professor Terry Bynum. Terry was one of a group of pioneering American academics who were establishing the field of Computer Ethics in the US. Terry was looking for somewhere in the UK to spend his six-month sabbatical. It was like manna from heaven! My suggestion was that our invitation should be centred on Terry being the co-chair, alongside myself, of an international conference called ETHICOMP to discuss the ethical issues surrounding the development and use of Information Technology. David as Head of the Department of Information Systems sent Terry the letter of invitation which he accepted in preference to the many others he had received.

The challenge then was how to get papers submitted and delegates attending that conference. At that time, like most universities, the marketing and publicity emphasis was on paper brochures, postal mailshots and telephone calling. So an ETHICOMP 95 pamphlet was printed and sent out to many hundreds of university contacts. Bert Logan was a colleague in the Department of Computer Science who had a keen interest in the use of IT in society. He suggested that I should use the fledgling Internet to publicise the conference. He taught me how to use Archie, FTP and email. Virtually all of those who submitted papers to and attended ETHICOMP 95 came from the Internet campaign. It was such a clear message about how the world was rapidly changing.

At the conference dinner at ETHICOMP 95 the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility was launched and so it is also time to celebrate its 20 years. As its founding Director I was supported by my inspirational ETHICOMP partner Terry Bynum; the Dean of the Faculty, Professor Paul Luker; and the Research Pro Vice Chancellor, Professor Brian Swanick. Many years

later Brian told me that my idea of CCSR and ETHICOMP involving philosophers to be located in a Faculty of Engineering was one of the craziest proposals brought to him and that was probably why he went along with it! Professor Ken Barker, the Vice Chancellor in 1995, wrote to me "Many congratulations on the success of ETHICOMP 95 and launching CCSR. It clearly provides a focus for you to develop in the coming years which will bring you into contact with other eminent practitioners globally". Professor Krystyna Gorniak, who attended ETHICOMP 95, wrote to me on 10th April 1995, "... the newly established CCSR is one of the prominent steps towards the creation of a world-wide network of scholars who are concerned about humankind's wellbeing in the age of computers ...". Very recently Bert Logan emailed me, "... You nailed something so early in computing terms it's amazing - hard to imagine now. Odd hearing people make the same bad arguments about voting systems, for example, that [we] 'nailed' all that time ago."

During the early years of CCSR, several Visiting Professors were in residence for extended periods. These included Professor Terry Bynum (US), Professor Don Gotterbarn (US), Professor Chuck Huff (US), Professor Jean Camp (US), Professor Kiyoshi Murata (Japan) and Professor John Weckert (Australia). These scholars helped to forge CCSR's reputation. Since its inception CCSR has been an influential leader in ICT ethics worldwide and is arguably the leading research centre in Europe. Professor Bernd Stahl, now Director of CCSR, and the members of the Centre have made great strides in applied ICT ethics research particularly in Europe. Professor Dominic Shellard, the current Vice Chancellor, recently emailed me, "I am proud of the leadership DMU has provided through the CCSR and delighted that we will be hosting the ETHICOMP conference on its 20th anniversary." He explained DMU's aspiration of challenging convention. CCSR and ETHICOMP have always challenged convention and pushed at boundaries. I hope that CCSR long may continue to champion the ethical creation and use of ICT across the world.

ETHICOMP 95 was held at De Montfort University on 28th-30th March 1995. It had three themes: ethical development, ethical technology and ethical application. There were around 60 delegates from 14 countries and 35 papers presented. One of the delegates came from Costa Rica having learnt, via the Internet, that Elizabeth France would be there as he was responsible for drafting data protection regulation in his country.

One presented paper, *Equal access and social justice: information as a primary good* was by Jeroen van den Hoven who is now a leading professor in the field and was a keynote speaker at ETHICOMP 2005. A second paper, *Integrating the ethical and social context of computing into the CS curriculum* was by Professor Chuck Huff who was a keynote speaker at ETHICOMP 2002. His co-authors included Professor Keith Miller who was at ETHICOMP 2015 where the programme still included papers about these issues. The impact of ETHICOMP papers is impressive. A recent citation search revealed ETHICOMP 95 papers being cited in 2005, 2006, 2009 and 2012.

Included in the 1995 programme were the five winners of the doctoral essay competition designed to support new scholars in the field. One of the winners was Sheri Alpert whose essay was *Computers in Government: the need to consider ethics*. Just before ETHICOMP 2015 Sheri, who is currently Affiliate Investigator, Indiana University Center for Bioethics, emailed me, "It's heartening to know that academics and practitioners continue to engage in discussions and teach others about the increasingly complex ethical issues that arise from the applications of information technologies. Doctoral students (future academics) have important contributions to make to those discussions and I'm glad that 20 years after my ETHICOMP experience, it is still providing an invaluable forum for their involvement. Best wishes to all at ETHICOMP 2015!"

In 1995 the Internet was in its infancy and just 0.4% of the world's population accessed it. Today it has risen to around 45%. Facebook is 15 times larger than the whole of the Internet in 1995. At the end of 1994 there were 2,738 websites. That had risen to 23,500 by the end of 1995 and to over 250,000 by the end of 1996. Today there are over a billion websites with over 500 new websites being created every minute throughout the world. In October 1995 during the pioneering days of the Internet, CCSR launched its own website. The aim was to create a worldwide portal for ICT ethics. This aim was turned into a reality by Bert Logan and a computer science student Patrick Foster who was on a one year work placement. It became the world's leading reference point in cyberspace receiving many thousands of hits each day, far out performing the university website at the time. As third parties started to provide information portals and access techniques evolved the need for an ICT ethics portal reduced and CCSR abandoned this role in 2010. Today digital information has reached levels of global pollution. New actions feed people's insatiable appetite for information. We are able to google, to skype, to blog and to tweet. A Google search reveals over 12,000 entries for *ETHICOMP*. In academia, publishing has gone digital with the focus on publishing individual papers rather than collections. In 1995 the *ETHICOMP* proceedings were a two volume in-house paper publication. Extra copies were sold via the Internet to libraries across the world. Today *ETHICOMP* 2015 proceedings are available in the cloud through a third party provider. Delegates received nothing on paper.

There have been 15 *ETHICOMP* conferences to date with around 1,250 papers being presented. *ETHICOMP* has been thrice to the UK, twice to Italy, twice to Spain, and once to Denmark, France, Greece, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Sweden. The next conference, *ETHICOMP* 2017 will be in Turin, Italy. In 2005 it was decided that *ETHICOMP* should try to engage with those in parts of the world where ICT ethics was at best in its infancy. This would be through *ETHICOMP* Working Conferences which were smaller and more flexible events. An event was held in China in 2007 and Argentina in 2011 and 2013. It is planned to hold the next *ETHICOMP* Working Conference in Southern Utah and focus on social inclusion. The *ETHICOMP* name has become recognised and respected in the field of ICT ethics and in 1999 led to it being registered as a trademark by De Montfort University to control its use and ensure ongoing integrity on behalf of the *ETHICOMP* community.

Of those attending *ETHICOMP* 2015 about a third were at *ETHICOMP* for the first time, many of them being doctoral students. About a third had been at three or more *ETHICOMPs*. These included Andy Bisset, Don Gotterbarn, Mario Arias and Ben Fairweather who had all been at *ETHICOMP* 96. Andy had hosted *ETHICOMP* 2011, Mario had hosted *ETHICOMP* 2010 and also there was Kiyoshi Murata who had hosted *ETHICOMP* 2007. *ETHICOMP* is more than a conference series it is a community. In 2013 Terry and I stepped down from leading *ETHICOMP* for, 18 years on from 1995, the community had come of age. The community now runs *ETHICOMP*. It is a community which is communicative, egoless, inclusive, supportive, cross discipline and fun-loving. In the special issue of the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* (JICES) Catherine Flick wrote a paper about *ETHICOMP* being a community mentor (Flick, 2015). It is a fascinating read about a special community which needs to be nurtured and cherished in an academic world obsessed with measurement and comparison. After *ETHICOMP* 2014 in Paris, a young academic Aimee van Wynsberghe blogged "It's always wonderful to meet the big shots and to learn how down to earth and helpful they are in person." I was given a gift at Paris and the inscription inside included "from the *ETHICOMP* family – your family." *ETHICOMP* is not just a conference series, not just an academic community, it is indeed a family.

In my paper *Future Vision* in the JICES special issue, I discuss the *ETHICOMP* odyssey and suggest where we should now go. I argue that our link with the wider community needs to be

regenerated. I write, “There has been much detailed observation and analysis but still the transformation of this into widespread practical positive action remains elusive.” (Rogerson, 2015, p348) In our world both content and political savvy are equally important. One without the other results in minimal impact at best but usually no impact at all. Important messages and key findings will be lost in the virtual dust of a digital library. The ETHICOMP community must address both if it is to continue to make a difference beyond academia.

It has often been reported that George Orwell’s involvement with the Spanish Civil war was the defining experience of his life. It greatly influenced his writing of *Animal Farm* published in 1945 and *1984* published in 1949. Both books were about systems of oppression and oppressive regimes. In 1968, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *Cancer Ward*, “As every man [and woman] goes through life he [she] fills in a number of forms for the record, each containing a number of questions. There are thus hundreds of little threads radiating from every man [and woman], millions of threads in all. If these threads were suddenly to become visible, the whole sky would look like a spider’s web ... people would all lose the ability to move ...” Once a significant level of interoperability was achieved big data existed. Big data is not new. Today we simply have *Even Bigger Data*. In 2013 the Edward Snowden disclosures, for which he has been variously called a hero, a whistle-blower, a dissident, a patriot, and a traitor, shocked the world. Appropriately, ETHICOMP 2015 has a conference track devoted to exploring the worldwide implications of these disclosures.

In the not-too-distant future with the cloud, big data, and maybe 80%-90% of the world’s population online and connected the scope for systems of oppression seems limitless. Consequently, we must consider and counter what oppressive regimes of tomorrow’s world could and might do in their drive to subjugate humankind.

In 1995 I dropped the ETHICOMP pebble into the pond of society and made quite a splash. The ripples went far and wide. It had far-reaching and long-lasting impacts. Those attending ETHICOMP 2015 represent the next generation of the ETHICOMP family. It is time for this generation to drop the pebble in once more and engage with governments, industry, practitioners and society at large. In that way this community will continue to make a difference and help to ensure we all have ethically sound ICT.

The ETHICOMP family is like a bag of pebbles. Everyone is different but together they carry weight and can make that difference. As the ETHICOMP family disperses at the end of the conference each member should take with them an ETHICOMP pebble and make ripples in the pond of society. For remember, as written in *Future Vision* (Rogerson, 2015, p356), “Computer jargon; Academic rhetoric – Actions not words count.”

## References

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